

STEPHEN CRANE & RICHARD HARDING
DAVIS—AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP



Richard Harding Davis and Stephen Crane were two of the most prominent American writers of the 1890s, renowned for their fiction and journalism as well as for the unusual and very different codes by which they lived. In spite of differences, they became friends, though that friendship was frequently under strain. Part of the basis of their friendship were shared experiences that also illustrate a number of the themes that run through the lives of their generation.

Davis was the elder by seven years, having been born in Philadelphia in 1864. In terms of motherly and fatherly affection, he also seems to have been the more fortunate of the two. Where Crane was the fourteenth child of understandably distracted parents, Davis was the first child born to a doting mother and father, and though a brother and sister later joined the family, Davis was always the favored child whose every act or word seemed freighted with genius—especially to his mother.

Both came from households washed with the power of words. Crane's father was a Methodist preacher and author, his mother a writer for church publications and for the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Davis' father, Clark, was managing editor and theater critic for the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and his mother the well-known novelist and short-story writer, Rebecca Harding Davis.

Crane's early years were not only word-soaked, but also filled with a stern old-fashioned Methodist morality. The Davis household, too, was proper, respectable, and imbued with high moral standards. But, while members of the Davis family were expected themselves to adhere to these high standards, there was also a fairly broad tolerance for the failings of others. Rebecca

Harding Davis once tenderly looked after the son of an out-of-town friend who, having spent the weekend in debauchery, showed up drunk and sick at her door.

She and Clarke Davis were often quite daring in choosing their acquaintances, opening their house socially to actors—Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, John Drew, and the Barrymore family were close friends—while the profession was still looked upon with suspicion by the social elite of Philadelphia. Both parents found it difficult to think ill of anyone:

Of all these tricky folk, and many other poor vagabonds whom I have seen shipwrecked and lost upon the shores of life, there was not one who did not have some honest fibre in his soul,— a high belief, a pure affection,— some rag of a white flag to hold up in God's sight as he went down.

— *Rebecca Harding Davis* ¹

I can scarce think of any man as a reprobate.

— *Clarke Davis* ²

Neither Crane nor Davis was a scholar, and probably neither one would have been tempted by college just a generation earlier. It is equally unlikely that either would have been accepted as a student before the tremendous expansion of American universities that took place following the Civil War. After a notable lack of success in secondary schools, Davis was admitted to Lehigh University as special student only because an uncle was on the faculty. He had rather rough start, becoming involved in a fist fight with a group of sophomores because he refused to be hazed. This led to a black eye, and a reputation for valor in defense of principles that was only enhanced by his starring role on the newly organized football team, where he scored Lehigh's first touchdown. He also contributed short stories to the school's literary magazine, and edited the campus newspaper.

He did not star in the classroom, however, and at the end of his junior year he was called before the faculty senate and told that he would not be allowed to return. His feelings were hurt, but his self-confidence was evidently undamaged. Drawing himself up, he defiantly told the assembled professors "You don't

think me worthy to remain in this school. But in a few years you will find that I have gone further than you will ever go."³

Crane had similar experiences at Lafayette College, Lehigh's prime athletic rival and the team against which Davis had scored his historic touchdown, and at Syracuse, where his acceptance was also due to an uncle with connections to the university. He spent only a semester at each, flunking five of his seven classes at Lehigh, but he, like Davis, wrote for student publications, and starred on an athletic team—baseball. He also, like many fellow students during this tumultuous time on American campuses, endured an ugly hazing incident from sophomores, using a revolver instead of his fists to resist their harassment.

The ball games Crane and Davis played were extremely important to them, as they were to most males of their generation. Crane remarked soon after the *Red Badge* was published that "I am rather more proud of my baseball ability than of some other things,"⁴ and Davis wrote that he took "the keenest satisfaction in the fact that he scored the first touchdown for Lehigh than in all the verses or short stories that he has ever written."⁵ One of the pillars of Davis' early fame was the skill with which he covered sporting events.⁶

Both loved the Jersey shore, then in the early stages of becoming a vacation idyll as American wealth grew and leisure time expanded, and they spent much energy swimming, running, and playing games on the open sandy beaches while they were growing up. Both were early local heroes, saving swimmers in distress: Crane rescuing a young friend; Davis a vacationing opera singer from New York.⁷ Davis' brother was convinced that this period of outdoor life was "the foundation of the physical strength that stood him in such good stead in the campaigns of his later years. . . ."⁸

Both were drawn to journalism, which had just recently become a legitimate career for young men of genteel background, as a way to make a living through their ability with words, though they had ambitions to a higher level of literature. And, of course, both *were* of genteel background, and shared in the "Romance of Good Breeding" that affected Old Stock Americans during the 1890s in the face of heavy immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. Both were proud of their long American lineage

and both, in moments of weakness, joined the Sons of the American Revolution.”⁹

New York was the great arena of the age, and they followed their different paths there as soon as they could—which, despite Davis’ seniority, occurred around the same time—Davis in 1889 and Crane in 1891. The two men held very different views of the burgeoning city. To Crane it seemed to combine the artificiality of the theatre with the grimness of battle. “The sense of the city is war,” he said to a friend.¹⁰ As soon as he arrived, he hurried to study the gritty face of the most dangerous combat zone, the Bowery.

Davis, too, thought the city was much like a stage, and a source of picturesque adventure, more playground than battlefield, and for that he loved it. On his very first day as a reporter for the *New York Sun* he was approached by a confidence man who mistook him, because of his dress and manner, for an Englishman and an easy mark. Davis played along until the fellow committed himself, then grabbed the crook by the collar, and hauled him to a nearby policeman to be arrested before rushing to the newspaper office to write up the story for the afternoon edition—with himself in the starring role.¹¹ “In one day he became famous,” said Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.¹² Davis, too, covered the tenements and slums, but the fiction shaped from these experiences was filled with the optimistic sentimentality that he had learned at home, not the clear-eyed and sardonic view of *Maggie*. That “book,” points out Thomas Beer, “came headlong against an American mode in fiction. These characters were poor and, so, should have been treated more kindly.”¹³ Davis was artistically handicapped by staying true to his family’s expectation that they, and he, would always kindly show the reservoir of good in each individual. His adherence to that code brought him great financial success and general esteem; Crane found artistic freedom.

To Crane, every aspect of human existence was so sped up by city life that he believed, as Christopher Benfey writes, “people had lost control of their fates” (70). Davis felt that the city was splendid because it offered a vast range of choices. Some people obviously had more choices than others, but all still had the power to make decisions that would guide their lives.

The two men knew each other by reputation long before they met. Davis had been greatly impressed by *The Red Badge of Courage*, writing his brother that "Stephen Crane seems to me to have written the last word as far as battles or fighting is concerned."¹⁵

Richard Harding Davis, early on, became known to everyone, thanks to his popular fiction, and also to the mechanisms of fame that were being put into place during the 1890s. His name was constantly in the newspapers and journals, and his square-jawed handsomeness, often drawn by his friend Charles Dana Gibson, decorated the covers of magazines as well as served as illustrations for his own short stories and novels. As Thomas Beer put it,

Davis mounted into celebrity as gracefully as he might have swung his fine body in its handsome dress to the cushions of a waiting cab. He rode, a figure of pleasant sophistication and fresh good humor, among passengers who lacked those qualities precisely and boys labouring with manuscript looked up and saw a star. (57)

And, at least in the early years, Davis was a star that major critics thought had a claim to art. For example, William Dean Howells lauded one story, "Gallegher," published in 1890, "as an excellent piece of work," and the French writer Paul Bourget declared it a "masterpiece" drawn with "a few strokes of matchless precision."¹⁷

Both Davis and Crane covered the "filibuster" stage of the trouble in Cuba, both were active in New York, but they didn't actually meet until 1897 in London. Crane himself did not find Davis' fiction worthwhile, but he did respect the journalism, as much as he did any journalism, and to some extent, he respected the man. "I have . . . a considerable liking for the man of fashion if he does it well . . .," Crane wrote to Nellie Crouse,

[but] . . . I have seen the social lion turn to a lamb and fail—fail at precisely the moment when men should not fail. . . . I like the man who dresses correctly and does the right thing invariable but, oh, he

must be more than that, a great deal more. . . . There are men of very social habits who nevertheless know how to stand steady when they see cocked revolvers and death comes down and sits on the back of a chair and waits.¹⁸

Though he at one point referred to Richard Harding Davis as having "the intelligence of the average saw-log," that was before they had actually met (Stallman 197). It really did not take a long acquaintanceship with Davis to know that he was exactly the "man of fashion" who you would want by your side if revolvers were being cocked and the angel of death was smiling at you. Part of his fame rested on a firm adherence to a "gentleman's code"—thus providing a living example to the public of cleanliness, chastity, and courage.

Davis, though respecting Crane's work, felt less respect for the man, whose bohemianism he could neither tolerate nor understand. But he several times came to the rescue of either Crane's body or his reputation, and he did this at some risk to his own body and reputation.

They both were correspondents in the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, frequently traveling together, though Davis did not approve of Stephen Crane's companion Cora. Not because she was a woman covering a war, but because he felt she was the wrong kind of woman. "She is a commonplace dull woman old enough to have been his mother and with dyed yellow hair," is how he described her to his family. He thought she was a distraction that kept Crane from more actively pursuing news stories, though he also felt part of the laggardliness came from Crane himself. "He seems a genius with no responsibilities of any sort to anyone . . .", he wrote in the same letter.²⁰ To Davis, journalism was, if not as high a calling as short story or novel writing, an honorable craft; he found it hard to forgive someone who only played at accepting the obligations that went with it.

When the Spanish troubles finally grew into a war in 1898, each was tempted to enroll in the armed forces: Crane, according to Beer, tried to enlist in the Navy but was rejected on physical grounds; Davis was offered a captaincy in the Army and agonized for days before finally refusing it, a refusal for which he was roundly criticized, and the criticism called Stephen Crane to

his defense when he overheard some of it from other journalists in a Key West bar. "Did any of you Indians try to enlist?" he asked (Stallman 356).

Both men took an active part in the fighting: Davis firing a carbine while helping lead a charge of Rough Riders against a strongly defended blockhouse; Crane acting like a junior officer during some hot action with the Marines.

Here, too, they were sharing the spirit of the times. All of America was swept by patriotic fever, and young men felt they had finally been called to long-awaited action. There have been various explanations given by scholars for the love of risk-taking that so powerfully marked this generation, but the major cause sprang from the living memory of the Civil War combined with culture that glorified war as an uplifting, chivalrous adventure.

Davis' and Crane's generation felt overshadowed by their fathers who had fought a great war that had decided great issues. Proud, but also envious and resentful of the glory their fathers had won, they grew to manhood hearing tales of the battles of the Civil War. They, too, wanted to live in a Heroic Age. This was particularly true, I believe for individuals like Dick Davis, Stephen Crane, and especially Theodore Roosevelt, whose own fathers had not themselves been in combat during the struggle, but instead had stayed safely at home.

Davis and Crane seemed to be everywhere once the landing was made in Cuba, sometimes together, sometimes finding different battle fronts. There are two particular episodes that are interesting for the differences they reveal about the men. They came upon the correspondent Edward Marshall soon after his spine has been severed by a Spanish bullet. After doing what little he could to make the man comfortable, Davis followed on after the troops, the action, and the news story he was there to report; Crane stayed with Marshall, trying to cheer him up, patiently writing out a dispatch that the wounded correspondent dictated to him, then carried it back to be cabled to Marshall's paper, instead of writing and sending his own.

Beer reports that Crane seemed to want to be shot himself, and even "talked academically of locations on his person for the bullet's entry" (190). At the battle of San Juan hill, he paraded in full view of Spanish marksmen wearing a pale raincoat that drew their attention like a semaphore flag, endangering the

soldiers, who were huddling in the nearby grass. Davis, who knew how Crane detested “anything that savored of a pose,” was able to shame him into taking cover by calling out “You’re not impressing any one by doing that, Crane.”²³ But soon Crane jumped to his feet again, and this time Davis tackled him and threw him to the ground, having his hat shot off his head while doing so.²⁴

Crane’s seeming lack of interest in living has been much discussed. “I am simply a man struggling with a life that is no more than a mouthful of dust to him,” he once wrote to Nellie Crouse.²⁵ Less well-known are the battles that the seemingly confident and publicly optimistic Richard Harding Davis fought with *his* demons. He was prone to severe bouts of depression, periods when he was forced to take to his bed for days at a time. Usually, however, he kept his fears under an iron control, but as a result of this suppression he often suffered agonizing back and leg pains, sciatica, that crippled him. This happened at San Juan hill, and a few hours after having possibly saved Crane’s life, Crane, aided by the photographer Jimmy Hare, returned the favor, by half-carrying the incapacitated Davis down the hill, under fire, to find shelter and food for the night.

This combination of anxiety and despair, the increasing nervousness of American life, also are part of the times, though a subject that is more difficult to make generalities about than sports, honor, and a generation’s desire to prove itself an equal to the fathers’.

One great difference between Crane and Davis was also obvious in their dispatches from Cuba. Davis, right up in the hottest part of the action at the battle of Las Guasimas, found a young soldier

lying with a bullet wound between his eyes. His chest was heaving with short, hoarse noises which I guessed were due to some muscular action entirely, and that he was virtually dead. I lifted him and gave him some water, but it would not pass through his fixed teeth.

The correspondent left him and ran further up the trail, where he discovered the body of one of the most popular of the Rough

Riders. Davis drew from his death a lesson of patriotism and chivalrous self-sacrifice:

. . . his very attitude was one of attack; his fists were clenched, his jaw set, and his eyes . . . seemed fixed with resolve. He was dead, but he was not defeated. And so Hamilton Fish died as he had lived—defiantly, running into the very face of the enemy, standing squarely upright on his legs instead of crouching . . . until he fell like a column across the trail. . . . God could not have given him a nobler end; to die, in the fore-front of the first fight of the war, quickly, painlessly, with a bullet through the heart, with his regiment behind him, and facing the enemies of his country.²⁶

Crane describing the death of the surgeon Gibbs spared the reader not one bit of the agony and random senselessness:

I heard somebody dying near me. He was dying hard. Hard. It took him a long time to die. He breathed as all noble machinery breathes when it is making its gallant strike against breaking, breaking. But he was going to break. He was going to break. . . . Every wave, vibration, of his anguish beat upon my senses. He was long past groaning. There was only the bitter strife for air which pulsed out into the night in a clear penetrating whistle with intervals of terrible silence in which I held my own breath in the common unconscious aspiration to help. I thought this man would never die. I wanted him to die. Ultimately he died. At the moment the adjutant came bustling along erect amid the spitting bullets. I knew him by his voice. "Where's the doctor? There's some wounded men over there. Where's the doctor?" A man answered briskly: "Just died this minute, sir!" It was as if he had said: "Just gone around the corner this minute, sir."²⁷

Davis was puzzled and often repelled by Crane's unconventional ways, but he was open-minded enough to recognize that his friend's work in Cuba was the finest that the Spanish-American War produced.

The best correspondent is probably the man who by his energy and resource sees more of the war, both afloat and ashore, than do his rivals, and who is able to make the public see what he saw. . . . Stephen Crane would seem to have distinctly won the first place. . . . His story of Nolan, the regular, bleeding to death on the San Juan hills, is . . . the most valuable contribution to literature that the war has produced.

And he goes on to say that "Crane was the coolest man . . . that I saw under fire."²⁸ Davis dealt with his mixed feelings about this strange man in his short story "A Derelict" where the Crane figure is dirty, drunk, and a genius.²⁹

There of course is great mystery in individual lives, and in the talents they produce, places where the spirit of the times offers us little help. I would venture merely one small observation on the difference between these two men.

Davis, raised in a happy, child-centered home that offered tolerance and kind guidance, never learned to seriously question the values that were passed on to him, essentially the sentimental values of the 1840s.³⁰ Nor was he able to ever look with any doubt at the chief sources of authority in the America of the 1890s. Crane, whose father died when he was nine, and whose mother was too busy to give him much love or attention, was a writer who often refused to read even the "approved" classics of literature just because they were so highly praised by authority. He could not help but question. One wrote, really even lived, to affirm, the other to explore and experience for himself. 🍀

NOTES

1. Rebecca Harding Davis, *Bits of Gossip* (Boston, 1904), 160.
2. Quoted in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 15 December 1904.

3. Elwood Worcester, *Life's Adventure*, (New York, 1932), 119.
4. Robert W. Stallman, *Stephen Crane: A Biography*, (New York, 1968), 29. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
5. Davis, *Lehigh Quarterly* (Fall 1890). This is an echo of the sentiment expressed in *Tom Brown's School Days*, "I know I'd sooner win two School-house matches running, than the Balliol scholarship any way." Quoted in Mark Girouard, *Return to Camelot*, (New Haven and London, 1986), 166.
6. A month after he bought the *New York Journal* in 1895, William Randolph Hearst, as part of his campaign to build circulation, asked Davis to cover one of the most important athletic contests of the year, the Yale-Princeton Thanksgiving Day game. Davis, by this time, had moved on to greater subjects, but in order to avoid a direct refusal to the rich young publisher he asked for the ridiculously high fee of five hundred dollars. To his amazement, Hearst immediately agreed. Hearst spread the well-illustrated story over the front page and the edition sold out. See Richard Harding Davis, "How the Great Football Game Was Played," *New York Journal*, 24 November 1895, 1-2.
7. See the newspaper clipping from the late 1870s in the Davis papers in the Barrett Collection, Aldington Library, University of Virginia. Crane's rescue of Wallis McHarg is reported in Stallman, *Stephen Crane*, 10.
8. Charles B. Davis, ed., *Adventures and Letters of Richard Harding Davis* (New York, 1917),
9. For Crane, see Christopher Benfey, *The Double Life Of Stephen Crane* (New York, 1992), 167. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical. For Davis, see letter to mother dated 11 October [1895], Barrett Collection.
10. Quoted in Corwin K. Linson, *My Stephen Crane* (Syracuse, New York, 1958), 37.
11. See "Our Green Reporter," *New York Evening Sun*, 2 November 1889: 1. "Tried to Bunco a Reporter," *New York News*, 2 November 1889: 4. "Mr. 'Sheeny Mike's Victim," *New York Times*, 3 November 1889: 5.
12. Edward W. Bok, "The Author of 'Gallegher,'" *Ladies' Home Journal* 11 (August 1894), 5.
13. Thomas Beer, *Stephen Crane: A Study in American Letters*, (Garden City, New York, 1923), 100. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
14. RHD to Charles, May 9 [1894] Barrett Collection.
15. The Howells quotation is from his "Editor's Study," *Harper's* 83 (Sept. 1891): 640. Bourget's is from his article "Journalism and American Literature," *Critic* 18 (7 February 1891): 71.

16. Stallman and Gilkes, *Stephen Crane: Letters* (N.Y., 1960), 114.
17. Both quotes are from the same letter. RHD to Family, May 14 [1907], Barrett Collection.
18. Richard Harding Davis, *The Notes of a War Correspondent*, (New York, 1911), 125.
19. So reports Beer on pages 191-92, who may have had it from Davis. The photographer Jimmy Hare claims that it was he who embarrassed Crane into taking cover. See Cecil Carnes, *Jimmy Hare: News Photographer* (New York, 1940), 73.
20. Quoted in Stallman, *Crane*, 199.
21. Davis, *The Notes of a War Correspondent*, 63, 64-65.
22. Stephen Crane, "War Memories" in *Wounds in the Rain* (New York, 1926), 207-208.
23. Davis, "Our War Correspondents in Cuba and Puerto Rico," *Harper's Magazine*, XCVIII, (May, 1899): 941, 941-942. The death of Nolan is in "The Price of the Harness" from *Wounds in the Rain*.
24. See Scott C. Osborn's excellent piece on the story and their relationship. "The 'Rivalry-Chivalry' of Richard Harding Davis and Stephen Crane." *American Literature* 28 (1956): 50-61.
25. Near the end of his life, after rereading his early letters to his parents, he wrote his mother, "I know now why we were such a happy family. It was because we were always, all of us, of the same age." Quoted in Charles Davis, editor, *Adventures*, 312.